

## COSTUMING FOR CONFIDENCE — COSTUME MEASUREMENT

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For most dancers getting costumes is one of the most exciting days of the year. Some students start asking the first day of classes (“do you know what our costume is” and What song are we doing?) as they anticipate this from the beginning. But for some students, this is a very stressful time as many stand in front of the mirror in judgment of themselves. I was one of those kids. In high school I developed body dysmorphic tendencies and being measured was a very stressful time for me. I stood there waiting to see what those numbers were going to be and even though by society standards I was a thin girl, I didn’t see that in the mirror. Most kids who have issues with their size, weight, and certain parts of their body suffer silently and don’t say a thing. We’re all trying to fit into that “perfect” size we need to be and it’s no different for kids. In fact, because of social media and the internet, our kids are becoming more body-conscious at a younger age. This is why it’s really important that we make note of that when we are picking out and measuring for costumes.



Costume measuring week is always the first week of December at my studios. We let the kids know in advance and put it on our studio calendar. This allows our dancers to get excited about the upcoming recital season and lets them know they are that much closer to seeing what their costumes look like. We show them their costume pictures the week before holiday break. This puts them in the mindset that after the break, we start recital choreography.

When measuring the little kids, I explain why and how we are measuring them. If there is a child in the class from the prior year or an assistant we demonstrate with them first. We Always ask a child “can I measure you” or “are you ready?” This allows them to be in control of their own body and be less nervous about the process. If a younger child is uncomfortable with being measured I have the parent measure the child while we guide them on how to properly do it.



What I have found is that just changing certain words can make a difference. I don't use "too big" or "too small" as those words can trigger. For example, if I have a student that's costume is too tight or too small, I would say "you know this costume needs to be a little longer on you, let's get something that is more comfortable." When measuring, do not make comments about their bodies ever. I never say "you've gotten so much bigger." If a child asks "am I bigger than last year?" I'll say "oh my goodness you're growing so much, you're getting taller that's fantastic." I also don't let the kids see the numbers when I'm typing them in or writing them down and I always face them away from other people when measuring if they are all together. We try to measure all the preteens and teens individually away from their peers so they don't feel self-conscious.



A size can make or break a dancer's psyche. Unfortunately, costumes cannot be made to fit every body type perfectly. Depending on where the costumes are made the size varies as well. Handing a dancer a costume that is a much larger size than what they normally wear in their regular clothes, takes them to such a negative emotional space and I have seen the look on their faces when this happens. To help with this, I have small stickers that I place over the size on the bag and use it to write the dancer's name on them. Yes, the size remains inside the costume but it is not the first thing staring them in the face.

Once costumes come in and are tried on, I always go over to each dancer and ask them how does it feel. I also have them dance in them so we can make sure that the costume fits properly (not riding up or falling down.). I make it a point to notice, do they wrap their hands around their waist because they're self-conscious, do you see their shoulders roll forward instead of standing up with pride. Are they not dancing to their fullest ability since putting in the costume? These are the small nuances that kids are going to do instead of saying that they are uncomfortable. Those are the moments where you can walk over and ask those questions again. "Is this costume comfortable and you how does it make you feel?" A simple thing like this will prompt a child to tell you what they're really feeling. It might mean exchanging a size, adding better straps or a piece of fabric but it's our job as educators to make these kids feel happy, confident, healthy, and safe.



When I choose a costume I always pick a costume that I think will flatter every body type in my group. When a dancer feels confident they will dance with confidence. That is our ultimate goal when the costume, choreography, music, and concept comes together and the dancers make the magic happen.

Today's kids are inundated with images on the internet and social media and are constantly comparing themselves to other people trying to fit the typical mold. It's important for them to see other dancers that look like them and they can relate to. Dancers come in all shapes and sizes, all ethnicities, all abilities. They have braces, glasses, unclear skin. It's a part of growing up.



Being a YPAD (Youth Protection Association for Dance™) Certified educator and having a certified staff has helped with our whole costume process as my team has the proper training and tools to make the best decisions for our dancers and why.

